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They're as American as apple (s)pies

By JOSEPH VOLZ

WASHINGTON—The remarkable thing about that press conference in FBI headquarters last week, with Soviet KGB Col. Rudolph Herrmann was that the FBI found him at all.

The toughest job FBI counterintelligence agents have is tracking down Soviet "illegals," spies who have spent decades preparing for illegal entry into this country. FBI officials claim they have "a rough ballpark estimate" of how many illegals are operating in the United States but they won't give it out.

Asked for a number, FBI Executive Assistant Director Homer Boynton cracked: "We won't know until the KGB lets us file a Freedom of Information Act request."

The late William J. Sullivan, who headed FBI intelligence activities in the 1960s, told then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in 1971 that "we have not identified one" illegal operating on the East Coast.

Herrmann, who was caught by a fluke when a KGB contact "blundered," serves as a good example of why the deep cover spies are so hard to find. He has been a spy for 25 years. All of that time he has been training for one target, the U.S.

Posing as refugees, the Herrmann family entered West Germany a few years after World War II. Armed with legitimate West German papers (but based on the alias "Herrmann") the family immigrated to Canada, then moved to New York 11 years ago.

Anyone trying to check out the family would have had to go all the way back to war-torn Eastern Europe.

Because Herrmann said he collected political information, readily available to anyone reading the papers, the initial reaction of many reporters was that Herrmann was a dud—hardly an important spy. But that shows a lack of understanding of what the mission of an illegal is.

The fundamental assignment is to burrow deeply into American society so that, say, if diplomatic relations between the Soviets and U.S. are broken, the illegal can provide intelligence. In wartime, the illegal can be invaluable.

Perhaps the most valuable Soviet illegal was Richard Sorge, a Soviet who became a German citizen before World War II, went to Tokyo as a foreign correspondent for Nazi newspapers and developed close relations with the German ambassador in Tokyo.

Sorge gave the Soviets advance warning of the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, but Soviet Premier

Joseph Stalin didn't believe him. Sorge was discovered and executed by the Japanese in 1944.

There was yet another key role for the Herrmann family. Herrmann's teenage son, who has spent most of his life in the U.S., was being trained as a second-generation illegal.

Herrmann bragged the other day that his son would have the "perfect legend." (A legend is a spy's cover story.) The son could pose as an American speaking fluent English because, after all, he was an American—as American as any other boy growing up in Hartsdale, N.Y., where the family lived for 11 years.

THE SON would get an entry level job in government and, it is hoped, work his way up in 10 or 20 years to a high position. He would be "a mole," an enemy agent burrowed deeply into a sensitive U.S. agency.

The last major Soviet illegal discovered by the FBI was Col. Rudolph Abel who, like Herrmann, was undone by a co-worker in the KGB.

Abel had posed as an artist in Brooklyn for 10 years, taking the same route from East Germany as Herrmann did. Abel even obtained an authentic birth certificate—of an American citizen named Emil Goldfus, who died in infancy in New York. Abel was arrested and imprisoned but never cooperated with the FBI. He was exchanged for CIA spy pilot Francis Gary Powers in 1962.

The FBI nabbed another illegal, Kaarlo Tuomi, who had lived in the U.S. as a youth, when he crossed the Canadian border. Tuomi's job was to watch troop movements and munitions in the New York area for the GRU, Soviet military intelligence.

Another Cold War case involved an unnamed Soviet lieutenant colonel who was posing as a New York beautician in the 1960s. When the FBI uncovered her, she committed suicide.

There may be hundreds more illegals at work right now—only the KGB knows for sure.

Although it is possible that the CIA has planted American illegals in the Soviet Union, it is not as likely. The big problem is that the Soviet Union is such a closed society—with the KGB watching virtually every major move of its citizenry—that it would be almost impossible to penetrate key government agencies. However, chances are that the CIA over the years has had some limited success in "turning" Soviet and Third World diplomats into CIA agents.